

Women's World: The View from Inside An Anthropological Study Among the Kamar Tribe

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ABSTRACT The study of women population has now become an essential issue in the domain of social science. A good number of studies, regarding women have been carried out by various sociologists, psychologists, economists and medical scientists. Anthropological knowledge has enabled us to understand the position of the women in societies and world view of their own. Anthropologists have given specific attention to the roles played by the womenfolk and their behavioural patterns within specific cultural traditions. In the understanding of the role of women and the status, possessed by them attempts have been made here to analyse the socio-cultural dimension together with the economic set up of a primitive tribal community- The Kamar.

Through sensitive ethnographic study of women's world and autobiographical accounts, anthropologists have accumulated evidence that these male articulated public versions of 'a culture' do not exhaust a society's symbolic resources or represent perspectives on 'the culture' women necessarily share, (Kessing, 1998). Women's world in tribal society is understood through this phrase 'how they are lived in'. Women's status and power are directly shaped by their role in the economic system of their own society. Women's status is a multidimensional entity and different studies tend to focus on different aspects of status. "Studies on women's status and autonomy in India have observed that women in the southern states of India enjoy greater autonomy - control over significant decisions affecting their lives - than their north Indian counterparts." (Ravindran, 1999) Sarkar (1994) opines that if the socio-economic functions of women are high and valuable in a tribe, her status is naturally higher. But if her economic functions are not very important she does not enjoy considerable freedom of movement compared to her non-tribal counterpart. Traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women. It is also reported that

women of Gosain Community do not enjoy equal status with men for they are economically dependent on their husbands nor do they enjoy freedom to exercise their will on economic, religious and political issues, (Sarkar, 1996). "A number of prominent women anthropologists lent support to the argument that women are universally subordinate to men. That in every known society, public and political life had been preeminently in the hands of men. Although the status, independence, and political and economic importance of women is relatively high in some societies and quite low in others, it is never coordinate with or greater than that of men" (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974).

The Kamar is a dominant scheduled tribe of Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh). During the sixth five year plan, Kamars were identified and included in the list of "primitive" groups of Madhya Pradesh. They inhabit the hill district of Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg and Surguja in Madhya Pradesh. According to census of 1981, the total population of Kamar is 17,517 in Madhya Pradesh and 5939 in Maharashtra.

The Kamars are traditionally shifting cultivators and expert hunters. Collection of minor forest produce and basketry are their perennial economic activities. Agricultural labour, forest labour, fuel wood selling, charcoal selling are seasonal economic activities on which the Kamar subsists only for a part of the year. They have adopted settled cultivation to a great extent abandoning their age old practice of shifting cultivation now.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present paper is mainly based on the fieldwork conducted in the year 1997. This study has been conducted in Gariaband block of Raipur district, where the special KAMAR development agency is situated. Datas were collected from seven villages of Gariaband block namely,

Bamhni, Kesodar, Pantora, Mohara, Amjhar, Nawagarh, Bagdogra.

The data have been collected by interviewing 100 women and men belonging to different age groups of the Kamar society. As human societies are the outcome of joint enterprises of men & women – their roles in the society are reciprocal. And one cannot be understood without the infliction of the other. In the present study the role or interference of men is also taken into consideration to understand the women's world. Women's role in economic sphere and their position in socio-cultural milieu are highlighted here to explore the women's world in the Kamar society.

The family among the Kamar is patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal. It is a unilateral social group, consisting of parents and their children; only unmarried daughters being regarded as the members of the family. It is also observed that the married daughters are not allowed to enter into the inner room where the ancestors deities are believed to be resided. Dube (1951) said 'Although the patrilocal family is the normal type, in a few rare cases we find some stray examples of patrilineal but matrilocal families also. Such families arise because of the custom of 'serving for a wife' when a *lamsena* or *gharjawai* settles with his prospective father-in-law and continues to live with him even after his marriage. When a father has no male issue, he keeps *lamsena* boy for his daughter, and after marriage the boy continues to live with her wife and cultivate the land of his father-in-law.

It is customary for the Kamar that separation from the family involves the boy's duty to set up an independent house for himself, immediately after his marriage. From his parental house he brings with him only those articles which were in his exclusive personal use. For the rest, he and his wife work hard in the first two years of marriage, to earn sufficiently to equip their home with the bare minimum essential for their lives or survival.

As per general rule inheritance of property is passed on from father to son i.e. the sons inherit the father's property. Daughters have no right of inheritance like son of their father's property. If a man has no son, then the property is inherited by his daughters. It is also obvious

that if the daughter is the eldest child in a family, a part of property is given by her father as per custom known as *badkhi*. This share of property is usually returned to his younger brothers, so as to get the facilities from his own mother's house in post marital life. In case the daughter does not return and retains the share with her, then she does not hope to get any assistance or reciprocal behaviour from her own parents or parental family. If father dies before the marriage of his daughter then the brother look after their sisters till their marriage. It is also a legal duty of brother to see that sisters get married.

The Kamar society has given a very satisfactory right to the widow. She can enjoy the property of her deceased husband for the rest of her life. When the children are eligible to understand or become mature then they inherit the property. Generally, a widow lives with her younger son. Dube (1951) said "if a widow does not take another husband and continues to live under the roof of her deceased husband she will get a share in the property". He also reports that the property of the family in a formal sense, belongs to the man who is the head of the family. The women themselves, however, exclusively own all property which they may acquire from their parental house. Their clothes, ornaments and digging sticks etc. are also regarded to be their property. The men folk do not concede exclusive rights of ownership to women in silver ornaments which are comparatively more costly. Although the husband is believed to be superior to the wife from the point of view of ownership he will rarely dispose off any property without consulting his wife.

A Kamar women enjoy a considerable freedom both in premarital sexual life and in the choice of a husband. Among the Kamar, the consent of the girl is considered essential. It is also seen that if a woman becomes pregnant before marriage, the marriage with the custom, of *Hardi utarana* (downward turmeric massage) which is a symbolic declaration that she is no more a virgin, is performed. In the general rule, *Hardi charana* (upward turmeric massage) which is the testimony of the fact that the bride is a virgin, is performed in case of marriage. The upward turmeric massage starts from feet, covers the entire body and completes with forehead. In the former

ceremony *Hardi utarna*, a full vessel of turmeric water pours on the head of the bride. A Kamar woman is fairly free to leave her husband if he ill-treats or if he cannot beget a child. The women participate in the tribal dances and songs freely.

Bride-price is prevalent among the Kamar. For getting married to a woman, the husband's family has to pay a bride-price to the bride's family. They bring 20 Katha of rice (1 Katha = 2½ Kg), 5 Katha of pulse, 2 Katha of salt, 1 sarree (*lugra*) for the bride, another *lugra* for her mother, 7 glass bangles, and 12 *Bhar* of *Handia* liquor, to the bride's house during marriage. To avoid the burden of bride-wealth, some boys come to live with his prospective father-in-law only when they obtain the consent of his parents. The boy has to live at the house and work for her for few years. This custom of serving for a wife is found among the Kamars. Only those who have very meagre financial resources and are consequently unable to bear the marriage expenses take recourse to it. The *Paithu* marriage is also very common among the Kamars. A woman has freedom to choose her husband and she just simply walks into the house of the man she wishes to marry and the two begin living together as husband and wife. The neighbours of the village expect them to give a small feast and provide some liquor to drink. If there is a love intrigue between a man and a woman and as a result of it the woman becomes pregnant, she can intrude herself upon the man, if he seems to be unwilling to marry her, through this form of marriage.

In the Kamar society, widows as a rule marry again. A widow generally waits for about a year after the death of her husband. And after that period she becomes the wife of one of the younger brothers of her deceased husband. In case there are two or three younger brothers, she is asked to indicate her choice. The widow can marry a person other than one of the younger brothers. The man who expresses to marry the widow, makes a proposal to her former husband's people. If they agree the man is required to pay a suitable compensation in the form of small feast.

Tribal Women and their Economic Role

Women, who are economically more conscious, play an important role in the Kamar soci-

ety to raise their economic level. A Kamar woman is not only a house wife, who does the domestic work, but she acts as earning member in the field of tribal economy. Women contribute to the family income by doing agricultural and casual labour, by gathering forest products and selling them in the market. They also make bamboo products which they sell after roaming from village to village in exchange of food grains or money. It is also noticed that the females are also busy with husband to sell the fuel wood and charcoal to increase their economic condition sound. In this context, it is necessary to mention that when the males spend their time by gossiping after consuming *mahua* liquor, whereas the females are busy with the preparation of *mahua* liquor for their personal consumption as well as for selling the same to earn money from this liquor. Females drink the liquor occasionally.

"Whatever the prominent type of production it demands, whether among hunters, herders or cultivators, most men and women do a prescribed kind of work and the social cohesion is sustained through what Durkheim called mechanical solidarity and social control maintained through repressive laws. Conformity to a common set of rules in the paramount values and Durkheim thought that this conformity was achieved through the fear of punishment, either secular or supernatural" (Beattie, 1964, P. 186).

The food gathering is purely done by the women. Dube (1965) reported that even the Kamars of the plains who have successfully adopted themselves to settled plough cultivation, have not abandoned their *bongi* (digging stick). Their women folk still use it occasionally for food gathering from the forest. They collect wild fruits like *tendu* (*Diospyros malanoxylon*) and *char* (*Buchnanian latifolia*). The char fruits are also dried and stored. Often they squash the dried fruit and eat them. The kernel of char i.e. *chironji* which they equally relish are now sold out in the market, as there is a great demand. The *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) flowers provide another substantial item of their diet. The fresh flowers are gathered by the women. They allow the flowers to dry and store them in large quantities. These dried flowers are necessary for distilling liquor. When no other food is available the women boil the *mahua* flower and fulfil their daily

requirements after eating the same. The Kamar woman collects the fresh leaves of pipal, buhar, and tamarind and cook on vegetables. Various tubers like *peeth kande*, *kundru kanda*, *keon kanda*, *baichandi kand*, *karu kanda*, *tikhur kanda*, are collected by the womenfolk from the forest.

Basket making is another important source of the subsistence of a section of the Kamar. As the green bamboo as raw material for basketry are not available in every corner of Kamar habitat. The Kamar of Mohera and Pantora collect the green bamboo from the Malewa Hill walking a distance of 18-20 km. Both men and women do the work of basket-making. Yet it is observed that the females are much more efficient in making bamboo products and have much interest in learning anything. The Kamar women engage themselves in working out beautiful pattern of baskets and other bamboo products. To attend the weekly market at Gariaband even the Kamar of Chikhli village come all the distance of over sixteen miles on foot. The women bring them a head load of thirty to fifty baskets of various sizes and sell them in the market. It is also observed that the woman exchange their bamboo products in exchange of paddy from nearby villages. The paddy are more beneficial as they get food grains for their own consumption and husk which is used for domestic animals fodder.

It is the woman who not only collects the forest products for their own livelihood, but she also bring the forest produce for sale. The forest produce like *harra*, *mahua*, *chironji*, *Dhup* (resin), honey, Tubers like *baichandi*, *tikur* are sold by the Kamar woman. The women are also busy with fuel wood selling and charcoal selling which helps to raise their economic level above the starvation phase. Dube (1951) reports that formerly some Kamars used to make good money by propagating lac on *parsa* trees. But now the Lac business is not very profitable and therefore the Kamars have nearly abandoned it.

It is clear that women are economically more conscious than their male counterpart and economically very productive to the family.

Division of Labour

The Kamar practice the most primitive form

of economy- hunting and food gathering. Here the division of labour is perfect where hunting is mainly done by men and food gathering by women. The division of labour between the different members of the family on the basis of both age and sex, is well-marked. After an early meal from the left-over food of previous supper, male and female begin the day's work. Much of this is a joint labour. Generally womenfolk take charge of the household work like cooking food, fetching water, collect wild products and dig out edible roots and tubers. Except rainy season, everyday females with their husbands (not children) go to the forest for collection of forest products. Males cut the tree and make into pieces and both the spouse carry them and bring to their home. Both men and women participate in basket making.

It is evident that the occupational skill is transmitted from father to son and mother to daughter. Men take the initiation of hunting, fishing, agriculture, honey collection etc. The male children wonder in the jungle and trap the small games and go with their fathers to field and assist them in grazing the cattle in the forest etc. as their ability. Whereas the female children are busy with assisting their mother in household works. The household works are assigned to the females. They are assisted by female children and old women. The old members of the family also assist other members of the family, through child rearing, child training. Males do the same household work occasionally when the wife is ill or in menstruation period. In the Kamar community, males are formulate enough to get women's help in most of the agricultural and other casual labour etc.

Both men and women do fishing, women prepare the *manj* (intoxicating substances thrown in the water before fishing, made of *manihar* fruit) and after the putting of *manj*, the fish get intoxicated and come up to the surface, actual fishing started after one hour. Women are prohibited to enter the fishing water with *manj*, during her menstruation period. The night fishing is different type. A sufficiently large water area was closed with dams. This area is divided into three parts. Very strong *manihar* fruit *manj* was spread in the water in the evening. It is the husband and wife who take initiation to catch the

fish. They spend whole night in a temporary platforms shaded by straw and catch fish. In the next morning they return back to the village and it is the woman who starts selling, moving round the villages. Sometimes it is found that they put the fish to dry in the sunlight and then sell it.

Women among the Kamar is generally seen to accept occasional labour work with the neighbouring cultivators, during the agricultural season. Females starts working like plantation of paddy, weeding and harvesting, from the very beginning of 10-12 years of age. But they are given a less labour wage than the males. The male labours get Rs. 15 daily whereas Rs. 12 in case of female labours. This disparity is due to the fact that women have less working power as a man. And moreover, the females are not regular as males in labour work for their duty lies towards household work.

Thus we find that character and extent of work are important determinants of the actual position assigned to women in a society.

Women's Role in Health Care

Health care taken by the Kamar women is highly noticeable. An experienced elderly Kamar woman acts as a midwife, who takes care the new born child and the mother. She cuts the umbilical cord carefully and she do the needful to bath the baby in hot water. She cleans the baby with the help of dry cloth and the baby is wrapped in clean clothes. A mother nourish her baby by feeding her breast milk. Breast feeding usually continues upto the age of two to three years or till the period of next pregnancy. It is observed that the interval of 3 to 4 hours mother feeds the babies for the first 1 year of age. The grand mother plays a great role in child care. It is found that when the child suffers from illness like stomach pain, cold and cough etc. she gives some treatment by applying mustard oil (lightly heated) on the belly or whole body of the baby. When the baby suffers from hookworm and other parasitic infestations, the grand mother applies the egg (unboiled) on the head of the new baby. This is believed to be destroyed the worms in child's belly. The women of the Kamar society have some knowledge of herbal medicine. They prescribe some herbal medicine to the lactative mother. Bark of *Kanke* (*Flacourtia ramantehi*)

and the roots of *chhind* (*Phoenix acaulis*) after cutting in suitable size, are boiled with water and add some jaggery. This liquid dose is given to the new mother for a period of three days which gives the relief from delivery pain and helps to recover energy in the body. Women are also cautious about food selection of food items. To regain the energy, after delivery, the new mother is given the *pej* (prepared rice with boiled rice water). During pregnancy, the women should not drink *mahua* liquor, which may lead to abortion due to excessive heat.

Here we find that the women play an important role in the sphere of health care of new born child and lactative mother.

Taboos and Place of Women in Tribal Rituals

There are certain norms and taboos which apply to most of the tribal women and are significantly in determining their participation in various day to day activities. Some anthropologists have taken the view that kinds of restrictions placed on women during menstruation, pregnancy and child birth may be treated as indicator of the status of tribal women. According to Frank and Bacdayans, 'surely the most obvious interpretation of menstrual taboos is that they are institutionalized ways in which males in primitive society discriminate against females.' Devereus George (1950) has argued that menstrual taboos are symbols of the high power and status of women, and a recent study presents empirical evidence for matrilineal societies showing that menstrual restrictions have no relation to pattern of male domination of women or the reverse.

The religious and economic life of the tribals is intricately related. Touching a plough and thatching a house are taboo for the Kamar women. The women cannot thresh grains with the help of bullocks. Sowing paddy seed is also taboo for them. On the contrary, sowing maize seed is entirely women's work.

Besides this they are excluded from certain religious festivals and ritualistic observance like their periodical segregation during their menstrual period. When paddy is being taken out for the first sowing, it should not be seen by any woman.

Apart from the normal restriction of the

periods of menstruation and child birth, the women suffer from a number of other socio-religious disabilities. They are not allowed to perform any religious worship. They themselves cannot offer any sacrifices to the gods. No woman can ever become a Baiga or village priest and even her presence is the proximity of the Baiga while he is engaged in divination is believed to be inauspicious. It may be one of the cause that some women are tonhi (witches) who are famous for their notorious witch craft, which cause disharmony in the equilibrium of their tribal life. Only the Kamar Baiga can save from the mischief of witches with the help of his constant effort of spell-uttering and divination.

Traditionally, hunting was almost a religious exercise, and the success or failure of a ceremonial hunt is believed due to blessing or wrath of the deity. They observe the prescribed taboos related to hunting. Hunters must not walk across the foot prints of a women in her periods, nor should they cross her shadow. During menstruation period a women should not touch any of the kills brought from the hunting expeditions. Any raw or cooked meat or cooked food touching by her will be polluted. This type of taboos naturally reduces the legal status of women.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding these disabilities and restrictions, the major responsibilities for the management of the household still remain with the women who are treated with understanding and

friendliness by the Kamar men-folk. In case of health care of the new born child and lactative mother, Kamar women play an important role.

Although Kamar women do not enjoy high status, they are economically very productive to the family as well as to their community. The economic value that women have in their way of life leads them to an important and irreplaceable position.

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